



09 OCTOBER 2012

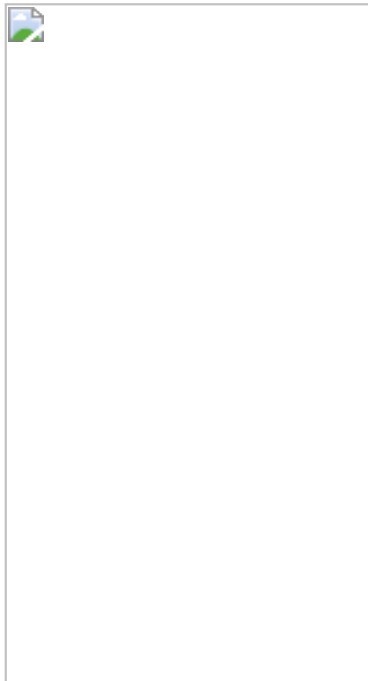


The Pastoral "Call," and how there isn't one

by Dan Phillips

There it was again. Listening to one pastor interview another, "the call" came up.

They were chuckling and sharing the story of how one of them felt, as a (young!) teenager and a brand-new convert, that he "had the call," meaning "the call" to preach. So he announced his call one week, and got up to preach the next. Period. No training, no apprenticeship, no evidence, no clue as to what it meant Biblically to preach (let alone be a pastor). He attributes this to a move of the Lord at that time in that location, as He reportedly grabbed up a lot of young men and "called" them to preach.



The brothers clarified that in their culture, all one need to is announce that he has "the call," and he is to preach. Like, right away.

Later, the brothers alluded to the fact that a pastor should understand "the call" in terms of that of Samuel, of Jeremiah, and of Amos. They call it an "unction" as in King James language, though I'm aware of no



such verse relating specifically to the office of elder.

I single this out only because I *just* heard it. I've heard or read elements of this conversation many times. Surely you too have heard similar, many times. Maybe you've said it. Maybe you believe it.

The concept of a *call to pastoral ministry* or a *call to preach* is deeply ingrained, and deeply traditional. It is down there at the point of men wearing pants when they preach. You don't question it, you just do it. Actually, it's deeper, since it is believed to be a Divine necessity, a movement of the Holy Spirit. I've heard of "the call" looming as a critical facet of ordination committee meetings. The candidate has to relate his sense of *calling*. If he can't, his "call" is suspect at best.

So I'll just ask one question. It should be a really obvious question. In fact, it should be the first question, shouldn't it? You regular readers know what the question is, already.

What verse in the Bible talks about a pastor's "call"?

The answer, of course, is *no verse*. Not one.

"But what about Jeremiah, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Amos, and all the rest?" What about them? We must at least say this: they all have the same two things in common --

1. They all *are* prophets.
2. They all *are not* pastors of Christian churches.

I mean, here we are yet again, aren't we? The only "call" the Bible talks about in this sense is a *revelational and verbal call to prophetic ministry*. Then there is the Christian's call to salvation ([1 Cor. 1:26](#)) and to live a holy life ([Eph. 4:1](#)), which is found in so many words in Scripture.

A pastor is not a prophet. A *prophet* is a prophet, a pastor is a *pastor*. (I'm having that surreal feeling I get when I have to say things that shouldn't even need to be said, and yet are points of actual contention.)

So a newcomer to this blog will, at this point, be fairly bursting with the question, "Then how does a man know whether he's ca... whether he's supposed to be a pastor?"

Well, you tell me.



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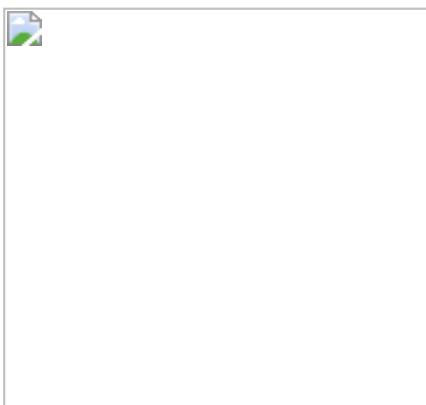
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Do you believe in the sufficiency of Scripture? Really? Then it should have an in-context, sufficient answer, shouldn't it?

What does it say? When you closely study and reflect on passages that expressly address the issue of pastoral qualification (1 Tim. 3:1ff.; Titus 1:6ff.), what do you see? Can you discern anything that is better expressed in terms of a "call"? Do they overwhelm you with internal, mystical, privately-revelatory elements? Or are they not rather almost shocking in their relative matter-of-factness?

Yet this "call" model has many baleful effects, real and potential. It makes "the call" essentially an internal, private, mystical, self-authenticating event.



Anything that aligns a pastor with the reception of individual, private revelation (and at such a critical juncture) is a disjunction from his actual "call," which is to strive to embody certain objective standards (1 Tim. 3:1ff.; Titus 1:6ff.), to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2), and to propound a publicly-accessible revelation (Titus 1:9, etc.). As seen in the story above, the semi-revelatory, individualistic, traditional "call" model can expressly divorce the preacher's office and duties from the control of Scripture. It starts everything out on the wrong foot, and has both pastor and congregation looking in the wrong direction.

With such rich and specific revelation, we have to ask the question: how is it that this model and language survives (and thrives!) in Biblically-faithful associations?



PyroManiacs Feed List

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Dan Phillips
@BibChr

Retweeted JoelNotJoel (@JoelNotJoel):

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57m

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@JoelNotJoel

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1h

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LABELS: DAN PHILLIPS, PASTORAL MINISTRY, SUFFICIENCY

POSTED BY DJP ON TUESDAY, OCTOBER 09, 2012



91 COMMENTS:



Terry Rayburn said...

Dan, I feel called to tell you that was a good article.

"It starts everything out on the wrong foot..." is so true.

5:39 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



DJP said...

(c:

Very tangentially, I'm picturing a meeting where the first speaker says, "My little voice tells me {X}. What does your little voice say?"

5:41 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



DJP said...

Maybe not so tangentially, now that I think about it.

5:41 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



MTHudson said...

Dan, You've neglected one of the back door benefits of 'the call' - or of not having one.

"'Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season'? I'm sorry, I don't have that 'call'... Come to think of it, I'm really not called to hospitality, either. Have a nice day!"

5:45 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Jared T. Baergen said...

This is the only so-called "calling" that still puzzles me.

MacArthur uses **1 Tim. 3:1** to define this call as an inward and an outward call that go hand-in-hand. The internal should be evident to all by the external, and vice versa. He defines it more of an internal and external desire. Not sure how accurate that is, but this "call" to ministry has always been something that bugged me.

Ask a hundred different people why you became a pastor and the answer you almost always get is, "well, I just felt called." Then

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you will search the Interwebs for the next ten years trying to find out what this arbitrary call is and how you can get one.

Good start in the right direction, DJP!

5:47 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Randy Talley said...

The only thing remotely resembling a "call" is "desire" in **I Timothy 3:1**. But since "call" carries an inherently revelatory connotation, the comparison is worse than remote. It's non-existent.

Well said, Dan. But the musical accompaniment? You're a sick, sick man.

5:47 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



DJP said...

Combining Hudson and Talley: exactly. If we are going to insist on the call to pastoral ministry, then we equally must talk about the call to show mercy, the call to help, the call to administration, the call to giving, and so forth.

Or we could be content with the language of Scripture insofar as we're able.

I know. "Crazy talk."

5:51 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



DJP said...

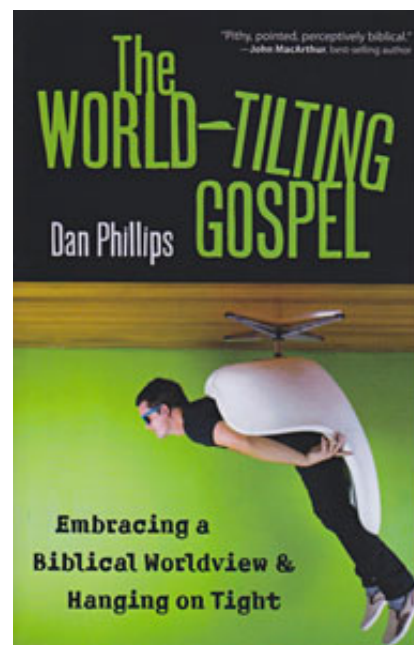
Jared, you're a dear brother, I'm glad you're here, and that's the last mention of MacArthur that I'll allow in this meta.

I don't know what MacArthur thinks about this issue. This isn't (and never will be) a debate about Mac's beliefs. I respect him, love him, am grateful for him, and am unprepared (and unwilling) to preside over a discussion of his thoughts on issues.

So let's just focus on Scripture if we can, please, without going the "but Rabbi X says" direction.

(Really, I wrote that all nicely and friendly!)

5:53 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



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Mike Leake said...

Dan,

I think what happens quite frequently is that many pastors feel something similar to Jeremiah's "fire within my bones". I know for me I can't NOT preach. But does that mean I am called to be an elder/pastor or does it just mean that I'm a disciple that is called to witness?

Though I do believe that there is preparation and passion that the Lord applies to the heart of the pastor (and this is often what we term "the call") if I'm trying to determine whether or not somebody is actually set apart for the work of the ministry then I don't use some subjective emotional experience to determine that. I look at the biblical qualifications for elders. If they meet those and also "desire" the work of ministry as in **1 Timothy 3:1** then I figure that is the Lord's work.

5:55 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Pam said...

Though obviously not "called" to be a pastor, I just had someone ask me this past weekend "haven't you ever heard that still small voice? don't you believe it exists?" I said "no" and was immediately questioned with "what about...?" etc, etc, etc (as the King said) Thank you so much for talking about this, Dan. I tried to remember all the things you wrote about this topic and I did remember enough to say "well, I just don't believe in extrabiblical revelation. Exactly what chapter and verse are we going to add to the Scriptures?" Though not a pastor nor elder, this blog has been a blessing to me. Thank you.

6:09 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



DJP said...

That's wonderful to hear, Pam. I actually talked about the "whisper" thing a little in the previous week's sermon, and more directly in this last Sunday's sermon.

6:16 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Chris Roberts said...

We like to sanctify our choices, putting a divine stamp of approval on the things we want to do.

6:29 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

- **Gene Clyatt (A Squirrel in Babylon)**
- **Rhoblogy**
- **The Contemporary Calvinist**
- **The Cripplegate**
- **Vern Crisler**
- **Guy Davies (Exiled Preacher)**
- **Daniel (Doulogos)**
- **Connie Dugas**
- **Eddie Eddings' Calvinistic Cartoons**
- **God is My Constant**
- **Phil Gons**
- **Grace Guy**
- **Joel Griffith (Solameanie)**
- **J. D. Hatfield**
- **Michael Haykin**
- **Sean Higgins**
- **Lane Keister (Green Baggins)**
- **David Kjos**
- **Clint Letterman**
- **Little Leaven (Museum of Idolatry)**
- **Conrad Mbewe**
- **The incomparable Al Mohler**
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- **Sharper Iron**
- **Kim Shay**
- **Ken Silva**
- **Sola Sisters**
- **Rebecca Stark**
- **Cindy Swanson**

 Webster Hunt (Parts Man) said...

4I've wondered aloud a few times why we can't just say "I have the desire, the skill, the qualifications, the liberty, and the character for x thing, and since I have all that, why not?". Sounds so much more honest than hiding all that behind the holy colloquialism of the "call". I think you've said elsewhere that trying to hide these things behind "holy language" and making all Holy Spirit-filled actually shows how little we think of the work of sanctification of the Holy Spirit. It kind of sounds like a type of superstition, really.

6:54 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Rational νεόφυτος said...

Hang on, in my ESV, there's a paragraph or so of blank space between Malachi and Matthew, and I *think* that's where you're supposed to write in new revelations about callings. Aha!

6:55 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Jules said...

I think you need to add another acronym. IPMSE=internal, private, mystical, self-authenticating event.

6:57 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Jules said...

Another back door benefit of 'the call' ... "I've been divinely called. Don't question me."

7:01 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 DJP said...

Yes. While rebellion and insubordination are specifically forbidden by God, sometimes the "do not touch the Lord's anointed" card has been played simply for asking questions.

...which brings *kingship* into it. *Another* thing the pastor isn't.

A textbook by a famous Baptist pastor used at my class in Talbot said that the pastor was prophet, priest and king.

Which, in my reading, is Jesus and no one else.

7:11 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

- [Justin Taylor](#)
- [Three Times a Mom](#)
- [Adrian Warnock](#)
- [Über-apologist James White's legendary "Pros Apologian" blog](#)
- [Doug Wilson](#)

THE RULES



PREMISE: DO NOT comment at all if you think the "right way" to handle Christian disagreement is to make an appointment and chat over coffee first. The vortex of irony you will create by commenting will sap the hair-care products off your stylish bed-head, and we do not want to be responsible for that.

Remember that you are our guests. We will, at our discretion, delete comments that we find off-topic, derailing, un-civil, slanderous, trollish or troll-feeding, petulant, pestiferous, and/or otherwise obnoxious and non-constructive. If we warn you, stop it. After no more than three warnings, you will find yourself banned, and all your future comments will be immediately deleted.

See an error in the post? How clever of you! Email the author. If you comment a correction, expect the comment to disappear with the error.

If you are confused about how the specifics of these principles play out in practical terms, you'll find a longer list of rules **HERE**.

BLOG ARCHIVE

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e **Unknown** said...

While agreeing with your concerns and your handling of the Scriptures (and both reflect the way in which I counsel young men now), I am saddened by the way in which some of the comments assume that a minister using the language of "the call" is necessarily an attempt to "sanctify our choices" or a "hiding behind a holy colloquialism."

I have used the language of "the call" because I have not known what else to make of my own experience.

As a young man, recent college grad, newly married, working as a manager at McDonalds, I was meeting with others my age pouring over the Scriptures and praying for one another and how God might use us for His glory. There came a point where I had an overwhelming sense that the Lord wanted me to do something- I just didn't know what. I was doing local neighborhood evangelism, I was sharing with my coworkers, I was seeking to serve in my church. What else did He want from me? The burden was so heavy and I couldn't describe it as anything other than "I feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders but I don't know what I am supposed to do."

These friends of mine prayed with me every Saturday morning asking the Lord to direct my steps. Well, one day while taking a break at McDonalds I cried out to the Lord and while I would never claim to have heard the voice of God, I might as well have that day. It was as if God told me that He wanted me to pursue ministry work. I went home that day and told my wife and she said that she had the exact same experience that same day- that she simply "knew" that I was to pursue the ministry. We were flabbergasted.

So I called my pastor, asked for a meeting, and simply shared my story. No "you must make me a preacher because God told me so." I was actually very confused at the time as to what to make of all of this. He responded that he felt that God was "calling" me into ministry. I began to weep because he was confirming what I felt I knew to be true. That was June and by August I had turned in my resignation at McDonalds and was headed off to seminary.

That was 18 years ago. And here I am, 3 church plants later and pastoring a Reformed Southern Baptist Church.

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Again, I am with you theologically in all of your concerns, but I simply don't know what else to make of my own experience other than that God "called" me. And so I am hesitant to accuse anyone of anything underhanded and disingenuous when they refer to their own "call." I realize it doesn't work the same for everyone and I have often chalked my own experience up to my own lack of faith- God had to make it abundantly clear for me to take my first step.

I do I realize that my same criticisms against tongues or "words of knowledge" could be thrown back at me when I share my story and that does cause me to pause and reflect on this whole thing but all I can say is that I know what happened and I can't describe it in any other way than that the Lord "called" me and I followed Him where He led me.

7:36 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

DJP said...

So let's see if I understand you, Unknown, since you offer yourself as a test case.

You have an experience that was utterly pivotal to your life, made all the difference to you about where you are.

Yet you cannot find it expressly in Scripture, and that (A) doesn't bother you and (B) doesn't slow you down from insisting that it had to have been from God.

But you would say you believe in the inerrancy, binding authority, and sufficiency of Scripture?

"Sufficient," but not sufficient to describe or give objective controls to one of the most pivotal and crucial experiences in your life?

7:51 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Cathy M. said...

It never occurred to me to question this particular claim of extra-biblical revelation until you and others helped me to see it as such.

How do such unbiblical claims get such a firm hold in our system of belief? Why doesn't marking it as unbiblical settle the matter? Just wondering...

What I got, and what I ain't got

The Pastoral "Call," and how there isn't one

"It Is All For The Best!"

The Right Kind of Passion

Well, his name's totally pyromaniacal... mostly to...

Not Just factual Information

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[BTW, thanks for the easy link to last Sunday's message. Fav. Quote: "It's not the pastor's job to launch a 'snipe hunt' for God's whispers; it's my job to stand and declare God's word."]

7:52 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



DJP said...

Thanks, Cathy.

I imagine it happens when Esteemed Brother X says it, no one challenges it, and Brothers Y, Z and A repeat it -- and the process continues until a tradition is born, named, raised, and Bar Mitzvahed. Or writ into canon law.

Thanks for your kind words on the sermon. (That may have been my favorite word to say, too. (c:))

7:55 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Bike Bubba said...

Would this argument, if followed, then lead us to see the Lutheran doctrine of "vocation" or "calling" as somewhat....charismatic in nature?

But to the main point, well said. How many disasters do we have in the church, and how many opportunities for growth do we avoid, because we're waiting for a call?

7:56 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Robert said...

I often wonder if some people/pastors ever stop to think of what all is involved in the work of ministry that Scripture says the pastor/elder should have. It isn't just standing in front of people and preaching/teaching, although that is what separates pastors and elders from deacons (the ability/skill to preach and teach).

Sometimes I think that this type of reductionist approach to the work of ministry leads many to feel "called" without really understanding how the Holy Spirit is convicting them to serve the body and present the gospel to unbelievers.

8:03 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

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Tom Chantry said...

I Timothy 3:1 says that a man's desire to be a bishop is a prerequisite for the office. In other words, no one can be compelled into office.

That's not insignificant. There are far too many men in Bible schools, seminaries, and pulpits who are where they are because someone told them that really *good* Christians become preachers (and *great* ones go on the mission field). But fundamental to anyone's entrance into the pastorate is an aspiration which is, well, internal.

Now God, who is sovereign, works through all sorts of aspirations which we may have, and providentially arranges His people using their aspirations and desires - along with many other factors - all without the least bit of mysticism, special revelation, whispered voices, etc. I think that once upon a time theologians called this desire, which is used by God to start the process of calling, as the "internal call."

Today that language has become very problematic, for all the reasons Dan alluded to. It becomes like the guy who tells the girl she *must* marry him because God told him so. How do you decline a pastor if he thinks that his internal desire is a special revelation?

But the "call" to the ministry is largely an external thing. That is why so little time is spent in the Pastorals speaking to men who want to be elders and so much is spent talking to everyone else, who have to decide whether or not to let those aspirations come true.

The church calls its pastors, and God in the Bible tells them the basis on which to issue that call. If you want to call it the call of God that's fine, provided that you understand it as nothing more than Christ giving his church a pastor, which *is* biblical language (**Ephesians 4:11**).

I tell young men with aspirations, "I have no idea whether you are called or not, and neither do you. Prepare yourself with humility and confidence in God, and someday if a church says to you, 'You - be our pastor,' then on *that* day I'll agree that you're called."

8:10 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

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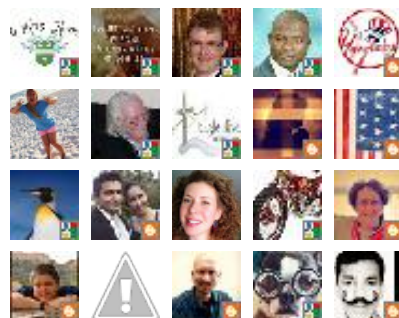
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DJP said...

Thank you, Tom. Value-added, as always.

8:12 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



NathanCBarber said...

The "call" that always confounded me was the "call to the mission field". Does the great commission only apply to those with a special revelatory call from the Holy Spirit? I think the same questions about the biblicity of the pastoral call would apply there as well.

8:13 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Tom Chantry said...

One more thought: It's a good thing calls are *not* a subjectively realized prompting of God from within. Because winter is coming on, and Milwaukee would be emptied of pastors as we all experienced a "call" to Tahiti.

8:14 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



Brad Williams said...

Things required for a man to be an elder:

- 1) Desire to be an elder
- 2) Maturity in the faith
- 3) A recognized gift to teach Scripture
- 4) The confidence of a local body that someone has these qualities, along with a blameless life.

Of course, there is a process for confirmation of these things, but that's it in a nutshell.

8:22 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012



sunniemomsblog said...

The "proof texts" I've heard for 'calling' (in the sense of a "internal, private, mystical, self-authenticating event") are [Eph. 4:11](#), [1Thess. 5:24](#), [1Cor. 1:26](#) and [7:20](#).

The only verses I've felt supported any sort of 'calling' are those that outline spiritual gifts. Even so, if one is gifted, one must also be qualified according to [1Tim 3](#) (esp vs. 6) and [Titus 2](#).

Sadly, the times when I see the 'calling card' (haha) played

most is when someone has done something that *should* disqualify them for the ministry, and they think their 'divine calling' trumps bad behavior.


8:31 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Andrea said...

Is it okay to just say, "I want to be a Pastor?" I'd really rather a man just say that, than hang it on God. I think some folks are uncomfortable with phrasing it that way...maybe we think it sounds more spiritual to be called by God than to just desire the office of pastor.

I think it is more honest, though to just own our desires. The church can examine a candidate, see if it feels he meets the qualifications. If the "call" is always "from God" that's pretty much a discussion stopper, and I always feel uncomfortable with that.

8:43 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Tom Chantry said...

A number of you have quite rightly pointed to the wreckage which can be caused when a man in the ministry uses his "calling" as an excuse for all sorts of misconduct. However, there is another pile of wreckage on this highway, and it is the spiritual damage done to men who believe they have the call but who never find a church to agree with them.

Scripture says that elders are to appoint elders, and also that churches are to select their own officers. Nowhere do we read of a man ordaining himself to ministry. So we understand (sort of) that in order for anyone to become a pastor there must be people willing to have him. We ought to understand that there must be other pastors/elders willing to approve him.

If a man merely wants to be a pastor, but his elders say, "We don't think so," or if no church will call him, then he ought to humbly say, "God's will be done." I don't mean to be trite; it's not easy, but that's what he has to do.

If, however, he is convinced that *God* has called him, what is he to think? It's *not* God's will that he has no church! His elders and all those people who wouldn't confirm his call are simply ignoring God!

Too many men have become disillusioned and distant from the church because they cannot reconcile God's providence with what they were falsely told was God's calling. These are the tragic consequences of poorly-thought-through theology.

8:58 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Frank Turk said...

Uses of the English word "to call" in the NT (with one of two refs; not a complete cross-ref; ESV used):

[1] To give one a name (Mt 1:21 or 1:23)

[2] To hail or summon (Mt 9:13)

[2A] The plea of those who love God (Rom 10:12, 10:14)

[3] To embrace or bestow a title to (Mt 23:9; Mk 10:18)

[3A] God's declaration over his own people (Rom 9:25, 1Cor 7:18)

[4] The sound of a trumpet (Mt 24:31)

Funny what doesn't come up when you look at it that way.

9:07 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Frank Turk said...

And having said all that, there is the one rub, which is 1Cor 12:28

"And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues."

It's the one clear verse which even the dedicated Dispensationalist will find himself "yeah-but"-ing.

9:13 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Rachel said...

This comment has been removed by the author.

9:27 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Rhology said...

Thankfully, the call to overseas missions is still safe.

9:33 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Rachel said...

My pastor has discussed this before during one of his sermons, and it's very similar to what you've said here. He pointed out that there needs to be a desire to preach, but it's not necessarily a direct calling from God.

Of course, it doesn't sound nearly as mystical and esoteric when someone asks why you became a pastor and respond with, "because I desired to do so, and I felt I fit the qualifications laid out in the Bible...etc." vs. "God called me to minister."

Maturity in the faith is very important too. When reading your story about the young man who began preaching immediately after his 'call' so soon after becoming saved, I found that very concerning. Granted, it's very natural right after becoming saved to tell everyone about it and want to witness to others, etc., but I think sometimes that's misinterpreted for a call to preach.

However, if after a few years of diligent study with a solid understanding of what the qualifications are to be a pastor, there's still that desire to preach, and the individual has received mentorship from a mature elder/pastor, then that would be a much more well rounded decision...unfortunately bereft of mysticism. (sarcasm)

9:34 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Jim Pemberton said...

I'm wondering how we can focus on scripture since this is precisely not in scripture. Dan, I'm glad someone is finally saying this. I get frustrated hearing one pastor after another say that they've known ever since they were in diapers that they were supposed to be a pastor.

I've told more than one pastor that I've never felt called to be a pastor or to even preach. That's not to say that I wouldn't if the need arose. In fact I'm preaching in a small church now occasionally whose pastor is retired from full-time ministry yet still serving as pastor on a contractual basis. Why they don't

just bite the bullet and hunt down a trained fellow for the task, I don't know. They've asked if I would step in if needed should it come down to it.

I consider a call to be the desire to study and teach, the gifting to do so effectively, the wisdom to recognize the opportunities to serve, and the maturity to do so faithfully. No secret little voice from God is necessary.

9:38 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 apathos said...

And then what do you do with the man who "is called" but is "in-between" ministries? Why would God call a man and then have him sit for years not exercising that call?

I left my last ministry partly over this issue. The church's finances were down and I offered to go part-time. There was an immediate (surprising to me) backlash ("how can the man of God want to walk away from his call?!") and I was asked to spend a summer studying the call to the ministry. At the end of the summer I could not affirm a call to the ministry in the manner that was expected of me, so I left. It was made clear to me that not only did they believe in a call to ministry, but they believed in a "life-long call to ministry". I.e., once you are called, you must only be a pastor for all of your life.

IFB churches are rooted in this kind of thinking. It is directly a result of this concept of a "call" that a man becomes untouchable and unquestionable.

It's not all of the Pastor's who believe in this that go crazy and power-hungry. Most of them are still God-fearing and humble men. It's more that it creates a sense of untouchable-ness in the congregation. What person sitting in a ministry like this would ever question their Pastor's ministry-related gifts and abilities? What if he's an awful speaker? What if he comes off as "strange" in private conversation? What if he gives the appearance of not being interested in his church's problems? Who will step up and question "the call" of such a man? Then, when the pastor has continued in this way for sometime, he risks being overcome with a sense of infallibility. After all, no one has brought any problems to his attention, right?

Thank you for a scripture-centered message.

9:57 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Robert said...

Isn't this the same way a prominent rock star, mega-church "pastor" in the northwest described his "call" to ministry. Maybe I'm confusing him with somebody else, but I'm pretty sure it is him. It certainly fits in with his beliefs (like what he likes to call "discernment").

10:20 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Scott Welch (formerly Scooter) said...

Thanks again Dan for focusing on the fact that our spirituality looks a lot like the world's: vague, me-focused, and not-to-be-questioned-by-anyone. Scripture is quite the opposite, clarity and certainty that leads to maturity.

10:35 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

e NathanCBarber said...

apthos: "IFB churches are rooted in this kind of thinking. It is directly a result of this concept of a "call" that a man becomes untouchable and unquestionable."

I think you're onto something there.

10:58 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Sir Aaron said...

IMHO, a huge problem is this unmentioned belief that in order to fully serve God, you have to be in the ministry. You love God, you love his Word, so naturally you think you've been "called" to go into ministry.

It's also natural for men and women to pursue a career in an area that they love. If you love God, it makes sense from that perspective, to pursue a career in ministry. But then to justify this desire that needs no justification, one has to indicate they've been "called."

11:07 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

donsands said...

I have a fine pastor now. He feeds and tends the sheep. He has

been trained in the Word. He knows the Greek fairly well, and is well rounded in his service for His Great Shepherd.

There are surely pastors all over the world, in every nation our Great Shepherd has His under shepherds. And they must be born again, mature, and know the Word, which is the truth.

I suppose a true pastor of Jesus our Lord will have the fruit of feeding and tending the sheep. He will also be able to ward off the wolves with the rod of the Word.

There are so many false pastors. and they gather make believe sheep to themselves; and even perhaps draw true believers away, if that were possible.

Thanks for the good post.

11:32 AM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Five Solas said...

To be a pastor or missionary or any ministry in the church (whether full-time, part-time, or lay ministry, these things I believe are needed:

the desire
the character
the skill
the recognition of these by the local church

That should be enough, without some subjective sense of a "call".

Why has the unbiblical need for a "call" still persisted? I'm not sure why. It just is so engrained in tradition that it is rarely questioned as being biblical or not, and when one does question it, it can be quite shocking to many ears.

As for people having an experience of a "call" to do x, I think generally people are interpreting their experience by their faulty tradition rather than by the Word of God. I know plenty of Christian who had no desire to be a pastor or missionary who, all of a sudden, did have such a desire. The desire may have been placed their by God. (If you want to call that a "call" fine, but the Scripture do not use the term "call" for that).

I think some churches when seeking a pastor have so emphasized the need for him to express a "calling" that the qualifications laid out by Scripture are deemphasized and unqualified men have become pastor.

12:44 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Linda said..

Five Solas, I disagree and I disagree with this whole article because it is biased.

God Gave us Scripture but he also (and you left out) HE gave us the Holy Spirit who Is a Person. Why people don't treat Him as a person is just beyond me.

If we look all throughout Acts and the rest of the New Testament, we see this basic principle to be true. The Holy Spirit "led", or "told" (in the spirit) Paul, Philip, Barnabas, Peter, John, Timothy, etc. where to go, what to say. And we encounter this whenever we are giving the Gospel to someone, interacting with them, praying for the Lord's guidance in communicating His truth to them.

I don't agree with this article based on Scripture which does teach us that the Holy Spirit does speak, He does have a voice.

And I'm totally against mysticism. I'm MOST opposed to the mystical unbiblical experience of "feeling led" and of "seeking" God's voice. I think it is an absolutely unbiblical notion. But at the same time I'm also totally against the idea that God cannot speak or call or prompt people who have His Holy Spirit living inside them.

If I were to give my Testimony I'd have (to lie) if I said that God did NOT say my NAME in order to fit your thinking.. And if God cannot say our names even though our name is not in the Bible, what in the world kind of God do we SERVE? God has a voice but cannot speak but satan and his minions CAN? I'm absolutely without words with the wooden Christians. No wonder many Christians are so cold and powerless. And I LOVE God's word especially when it is illumined by the Holy Spirit..

By the way, I was brought up Presbyterian and what totally blew me away was how REAL and ALIVE GOD IS. He's not some far away person. He gave us His SON and he is alive inside us.

Christianity is about a living dynamic person =he did not leave us as orphans.

The Holy Spirit is our Comforter, our Teacher, our Counselor.

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. (**Romans 14:17**)

3:04 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

Five Solas said...

The Holy Spirit leads us using the Scripture which He inspired the human authors to write and illumines our minds to understand, apply and obey.

You cannot separate the Spirit from the Word.

You said, "The Holy Spirit "led", or "told" (in the spirit) Paul, Philip, Barnabas, Peter, John, Timothy, etc. where to go, what to say. "

He told them things with audible, quotable words not fuzzy, subjective feelings of a still, small never-told-to-look-for voice that many today are attributing to the Holy Spirit.

4:08 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

e mikeb said...

I won't mention which view of the call the Rabbis MacArthur, Spurgeon, Charles Bridges, etc. hold in common.

But we do know this from Scripture:

1. To be an elder one must desire the work of the office (1 Tim .3:1). This can be labeled what you like, but traditionally in reformed circles has been labeled an "internal call."
2. Other elders are supposed to search out potential elders by measuring them according to the requirements mentioned in 1 Tim 3 and Titus (also cf. **Acts 16:1-3**). Call it what you like, but traditionally this has been labeled an "external call."

4:44 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

donsands said...

"if God cannot say our names even though our name is not in

the Bible, what in the world kind of God do we SERVE?"-Linda

God does call everyone of His own by name.

He doesn't speak audibly, for if He did then that would be Scripture, and we could add to the Holy Writ, which we better never do.

He has given us His Word and His Spirit as you say.

And we must never go outside of His truth, and must never trust in our own emotions.

At the same time the genuine Christian will know Christ, and will rejoice in Him, and have peace in Him, and love Him, as we trust in Him.

There's tremendous joy and passion in knowing Christ through His Word and Spirit.

I'm glad you speak your mind and from your heart. And you also need to have an open heart as you read a good post like Dan's. Lord bless you sister.

4:59 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Sam Haylor said...

Dan, we're kindred spirits you and I! I recently replied to the blog of a well-known seminary president - whom I love and respect greatly and is WAY smarter than me - on this very subject. I think it's perfectly fine to use words or catch phrases that don't appear in Scripture, but when they are asserted as BEING Scriptural then the bells clang and the lights flash.

The reason it was important enough for me to call out is that it closely resembles other very subjective phrases that have drawn friends of mine into deep dark doctrinal waters, convinced God has "spoken" to them through (literal) signs and impressions.

I get why people say it though. How else does one explain or quantify this work which God has wrought in a man ([Acts. 20:28](#))? The man who makes himself an overseer is just asking for trouble!

5:14 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Carl C. said...

The first time I was confronted with the point of your post was a conference message by Garry Friesen. I only bring him up because he had an experience like what you alluded to:

I've heard of "the call" looming as a critical facet of ordination

committee meetings. The candidate has to relate his sense of calling. If he can't, his "call" is suspect at best.

In response he pointed out the lack of Scriptural support for such, and after deliberation they 'made an exception' in going forward with his ordination. It's just sad this has to be an exceptional understanding of pastoral ministry, rather than the starting point. It's refreshing to see someone else give this some thought, thank you.

5:21 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 Carl C. said...

I haven't seen anyone bring up **James 3:1**: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." Inasmuch as the verse applies to the teaching aspect of pastoral ministry:

1. It seems to be a neon sign warning aspiring elders (& teachers) to exercise cautious restraint before diving in because of the office's responsibility; is this a proper application? Does this necessarily imply the training and preparation period required for such an office, perhaps in order to give others the chance to evaluate their qualifications? (I may be way off exegetically, so pastors please correct me!)
2. A bit more broadly: for one who has the aspiration/desire in **1 Tim 3:1**, to what extent, if any, does **James 3:1** help shape the desire?

I'm probably on a limb here, since this verse doesn't seem to "expressly address the issue of pastoral qualification", but that's really my point. I'd like to see if they connect somehow.

6:21 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 MST said...

Ever noticed that pastors, at least the ones I've met, are called to leave a smaller church to a bigger church and bigger salary. Rarely the other way around.

7:22 PM, OCTOBER 09, 2012

 David said...

Well, God has called me to minister in Japan- for a season. He always 'gives you a verse' in confirmation. Mine is **Acts 19:22** "but he himself stayed in Asia for a season."
;-)

12:24 AM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

 Andrew said...

Hi Dan. This is a stimulating post, but I'm not sure that things are as cut and dried as you suggest.

Surely behind the weighing and meditating on the *objective* revelation of Scripture, there is some kind of *subjective* responsiveness which senses and feels that this is an office to which God has called him.

I agree with the substance of what you say here, but I'm not sure that in trying to get rid of the bathwater of rabid subjectivism that you haven't hurled the baby of responding to God's revelation out as well.

I found the following paragraph a little enigmatic:

So a newcomer to this blog will, at this point, be fairly bursting with the question, "Then how does a man know whether he's ca... whether he's supposed to be a pastor?"

Well, you tell me.

Surely as part and parcel of saying that there isn't a 'pastoral call' it falls to you to tell us how a man moves from the objective revelation concerning pastoral/eldership responsibilities to knowing that this ministry is something which he should personally pursue. I'm almost certain that somewhere in there will lurk a hint of subjective response.

Thanks as always for your stimulating writing.

2:29 AM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

 Joel Knight said...

Question. Does **1 Timothy 3:1** actually say that one of the qualifications for Eldership is a desire to be an elder? Isn't Paul simply affirming that a desire is a good thing since the task is noble. Is it from v2 that he outlines the actual qualifications for eldership?

3:11 AM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

 dbsr said...

I am always amazed at how easy it is for some people to look at 1 Tim 3 and say "here are the qualifications for elders" and then say, "so the pastor..." It seems to me some bait and switch going on. Particularly in an article that is demanding chapter and verse for "the call". If we want to remain faithful to biblical usage, should we not insist on viewing "pastor" as a function rather than an office?

As an overseas missionary, I struggled with the issue of "the call" years ago and came to the conclusion that it was a decision like any other major decision (like marriage, career, etc.) and we should seek biblical guidance, the counsel of older, wiser believers, and to wait on the Lord. I did find Gary Friensen's book on decision making to be very helpful in my own thinking at the time.

3:24 AM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

 Rhology said...

David,

Why that verse and not 1 Chronicles 4:1?

5:17 AM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

 Stephen said...

Clearly David has now found himself in disobedience to the Lord and is repenting for not residing himself in modern day Turkey....

6:11 AM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

 Nash Equilibrium said...

What about 1 Cor 12:28 that Frank brought up? I didn't see where anyone addressed that "yeah but" verse, which on a prima facie basis would be a good defense of charismaniacs against cessationism. I can see someone bringing that up and I'd like to be able to address it accurately. Thanks.

9:33 AM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

 Julia Joy said...

Without "the call" there can be no women preachers. No woman can claim "But God called me, so that doesn't make sense," when confronted with scriptures like 1 Tim. 2:12-15 or 1 Cor. 11:3.

1:52 PM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

DJP said...

If anyone thinks you're kidding, Julia, I can attest that I've heard it used. When I was at Talbot, a guest speaker at Biola during chapel (female "pastor," IIRC Princeton-educated) played that trump card. The Holy Spirit had called her to be a pastor; how could she disobey?

1:54 PM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

Rhology said...

Heck, I just heard it two weeks ago while open-air preaching. A woman stopped by with her obviously lesbian partner and told us God had called her to be a pastor.

Trying to talk to her was like talking to a person who was totally ignoring you.

2:00 PM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

John N said...

That's a fair call :-)

I understand what you're trying to address here and it's quite valid, but let's bring it closer to home a little.

How did YOU become a pastor?

If memory serves me correctly (and I am getting on with age), you once wrote in this blog how you were not satisfied being in an IT job even though it paid you well etc because your desire was to pastor (I can't remember your exact words).

My point is that this desire/tug/pull (whatever you want to call it) that you had, is what others commonly refer to as a 'call' implying perhaps that God put it in their hearts and minds. So in the end, while you may be more precise in your terminology and are able to poke a hole in poor exegesis, are we not talking about the same thing?

Also, if God *appointed* in the church (1 Cor 12:28 as mentioned above), how does he appoint? Is he waiting for someone to have a desire so he can appoint them, or is he planting that desire in someone's heart (and the gifting to go along with it) as a sovereign act of the divine will?

I would humbly suggest that it's this whole process that many loosely refer to as 'the call'.

The problem is that many (as you pointed out) relied solely on a mystical internal call and nothing else and made that the sole qualification for office. In this sense I am glad that Paul calls it a 'desire' because it demystifies it, but at its core it has an undeniable intuitive element to it. It is equally undeniable that the term has been widely MISused, ABused, MISunderstood, MIScommunicated and laced with new-agey parlance. However, that should not invalidate the fact that before you start building on the objective qualifications of the office, it starts with a desire that motivates you to do the rest.

3:08 PM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

DJP said...

John, my response is brief and simple:

Given that "call" is an explicitly Biblical term with a specific cargo that *is not warranted* in this case; and given that we have plenty of perfectly serviceable and non-misleading terms to describe what Scripture says, why not just eschew the former and cleave to the latter?

So far, no one has produced one good reason.

It's like the case for saying that a pastor is a prophet. Yeah... except that he *isn't*.

3:17 PM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

John N said...

You said "So far, no one has produced one good reason".

I'm not batting for the other side, I actually agree with you. I'm simply pointing out that there is "overlap" of meaning, in that some mean what you mean but they use different words. It's one of those unfortunate Christianese words that have been coined (like calling the platform an altar).

The key issue here as you said, is that the term IS misleading and like someone said once, "once you move away from New Testament language you move away from New Testament thinking".

3:42 PM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

DJP said...

Right, I understand.

Or like calling the auditorium the "sanctuary."

3:45 PM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

 Stephen said...

Ok Dan, in this meta you've already decreed that pastors are neither kings nor prophets. What's next, you'll tell me pastors are also not priests?? How am I supposed to vision-cast and organize my parachurch without being able to appoint leaders according to prophet, priest, and king?

7:04 PM, OCTOBER 10, 2012

DJP said...

I was thinking of working up to that one, after I make the case that hamburgers are not hot dogs, bacon is not a beacon, and coffee is not concrete.

4:34 AM, OCTOBER 11, 2012

 esther Jones said...

Interesting article. I actually did a word study here awhile back on the word "call". I was looking for the "call" to singleness.

Guess what? There's no such thing as a call to singleness, either.

;)

4:17 PM, OCTOBER 11, 2012

DJP said...

Correct. Both are called "gifts."

4:20 PM, OCTOBER 11, 2012

 Terry Mengle said...

Dear Dan:

I realize this comment is late and you may not see it, but I just read your article on "The Call" to ministry and felt led to answer your article filled with preconceived notions.

First, you admitted that Old Testament prophets received calls to the prophetic office. Yet you probably do not believe in present day prophets although they are mentioned in **Ephesians 4:11** as an ascension gift of Christ to the Church. You might be honest enough to admit there is a prophetic element to preaching and you might admit that God is the same yesterday, today and forever and has the right and predeliction to be consistent. Who would be so foolish as to say God cannot "call" his servants today?

You ask: What verse in the Bible talks about a pastor's call? I would ask: What verse in the Bible forbids a call to ministry? We do not have biblical authorization for the use of pianos, microphones, or even copy machines – yet we use them.

You set up a Straw Man with your story of a teenager who claimed a "call" from God and went directly to preaching without any training or apprenticeship. My claim is that any person, call or not, should have to pass the litmus tests of spiritual maturity and character based on biblical requirements.

I cannot help but wonder if you believe in the legitimacy of Christ's "call" to the apostle Paul.

TerryM

12:45 AM, OCTOBER 15, 2012

 DJP said...

Terry, was there ever a point at which you did believe in the sufficiency of Scripture? If so, what changed your mind? What is your authority now?

6:19 AM, OCTOBER 15, 2012

 Terry Mingle said...

Dan:

I respect where you are coming from and appreciate your view of the sufficiency of scripture. The problem I see is that your faith is strictly cerebral and deifies human intellect and all too often this means we do not believe that God still speaks to His people today extrabiblically and rules out all the supernatural aspects of a relationship with Christ. Since we have a supernatural God that limits God's influence in our life and denies intimacy between the Bride and the Bridegroom.

1:50 PM, OCTOBER 15, 2012

DJP said...

So, to your mind, believing that **Scripture is what God says it is, that it does what God says it does, and that it should have the place in our lives that God says it should have**, is deifying human reason and anti-supernatural.

I would earnestly suggest that something went off-rail in your **instruction as (and understanding of what it means to be) a disciple of Christ.**

2:12 PM, OCTOBER 15, 2012

e Terry Mengle said...

You have put words in my mouth. Scripture should be our first source for us and should be the foundation of everything we do. However, Scripture tells us that God's Spirit relates to us through our spirit and that is supernatural. I have seen the reverence shown to John MacArthur (one of my past teachers) and know he has pretty much hated the idea that our relationship should have supernatural elements. The supernatural element is scary to those that only want to have a non-supernatural Christian life. It is less messy, but all too often it leads to legalism and Phariseeism.

I understand discipleship, it means learner in Greek, and sadly some don't want to go on learning in ways that seem messy and unsafe.

9:38 PM, OCTOBER 15, 2012

DJP said...

That's a ridiculous slander on MacArthur, and you should repent of it.

You are simply proving my point, and you don't even see it. Whoever's mistaught you probably bears some blame, but you need to shoulder it and grow up.

You don't get to reject what the Word does say, insist on making up what it doesn't say, and then call those who believe God "Pharisees." What you are doing is the essence of Pharisaism: disbelief in God's own self-testimony, insistence on adding to it.

Now I'm fearing I've been over-patient with you. Read the post and think about it. Read my last comment to you and what it links to, and think about it. Repent of your ungodly mysticism and grow up.

5:26 AM, OCTOBER 16, 2012

 Terry Mengle said...

John 9:39-41

New International Version (NIV)

39 Jesus said,[a] “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

40 Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”

41 Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

2:11 PM, OCTOBER 16, 2012

 DJP said...

That sounds like a confession, but for it to clear your conscience and deal with your guilt you should say it in your own words.

2:14 PM, OCTOBER 16, 2012

 Terry Mengle said...

God bless you brother Dan. I hope your religion is more than Father, Son and Holy Bible. It should be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Adios.

9:18 PM, OCTOBER 17, 2012

 DJP said...

That cliché proves you haven't heard a word.

But it always comes down to that, doesn't it? Charismatics, continuationists, Pentecostals, Third Wavers — they all have in common that they don't believe the Holy Spirit.

They don't believe the Holy Spirit when **He tells them what the Word He inspired is and does, and what role it should have in the believer's life.**

They don't believe the Holy Spirit when He explains His own ministry.

They are sure they know better than God the Holy Spirit.

It's one of life's tragic ironies.

5:11 AM, OCTOBER 18, 2012



SammyBoy said...

"... and coffee is not concrete."

You clearly aren't drinking the coffee that I'm subjected to here.

9:05 AM, DECEMBER 11, 2012



Ian Carmichael said...

Hi Dan

Although it's a few months ago now, I'm very glad you raised this topic of "the call", and I'm also really encouraged to see a good number of people heartily agreeing with what you had to say.

I am commenting now because we are a little apprehensive about how one of our new books will be received in the North American scene when we release it in a few weeks time.

As you say, "The concept of a call to pastoral ministry or a call to preach is deeply ingrained, and deeply traditional." To suggest that it is wrong and pastorally damaging is attacking a fairly entrenched sacred cow.

The upcoming book is called "Do You Feel Called By God? Rethinking the call to ministry", by Michael Bennett.

Marty Sweeney, from our US office, is going to send you a copy for your interest.

It's not on sale yet, but there's more information [here](#) if you are interested.

Maybe it will 're-ignite' some more PyroManiacs discussion.
Hope so. We might need all the friends we can muster!

Warm regards

Ian Carmichael
Matthias Media
Sydney

3:45 PM, FEBRUARY 13, 2013

 **DJP** said...

Sweet; Matthias has put out some great stuff.

3:58 PM, FEBRUARY 13, 2013

 **Jeri Tanner** said...

Thanks, Dan, and thanks Matthias Media, too.

8:52 PM, FEBRUARY 15, 2013

 **stirrings** said...

Terry M wrote: "The supernatural element is scary to those that only want to have a non-supernatural Christian life"
So, being REGENERATED and brought out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of Christ in the first place is not enough of a "supernatural element"?? How can a real Christian life even be "non-supernatural" (does "born from above" ring any bells?)

4:03 PM, MARCH 13, 2013

 **Burrito34** said...

I came over here from the comments section from Frank Turk's exchange with Adrian Warnock. I appreciate this very useful post for anyone considering full time ministry and I wish I had read something like this way back when I thought I had that *mysterious feeling* to preach. It actually turns out that it's important to know what's written in First Timothy and Titus and strive for the qualities listed therein for pastors and deacons. Also something else that is essential is to be (as John MacArthur taught) is saved, Spirit filled, sanctified, submissive and surrendered to God, and willing to suffer for Him if necessary. Then, in whatever station one occupies in life, make sure you are grounded in solid biblical doctrine, get out there and DO SOMETHING.

I think that's the best way to find out how a person can offer his or her life to God in ministry that honors Him, whatever it may end up being, be it great or small.

12:18 AM, NOVEMBER 16, 2013

 theorthodoxguy said...

Very good article Dan. I use to think I had that call, until I actually started reading my bible and realized it was nothing but emotional manipulation from man who want teenagers to become pastors!

I dropped it all, until the church recognizes me as such a man, I'm pleased to be an ordinary servant of the Lord.

Mike.B

7:32 AM, AUGUST 15, 2014

 Mark E Kreslins said...

I am thrilled to read articles like this and can imagine a day when this whole "call" fad is over; it does not comport well with Scripture!

4:42 PM, AUGUST 23, 2014

 Dan Cogan said...

As others have said, excellent post. The idea of starting things off on the wrong foot is spot on. I wonder though if the terminology comes more from the idea that everyone has a vocational calling, something they are particularly gifted in, as opposed to the way people most often use the phrase "called," being in the sense that they heard/sensed/felt, etc.

8:06 PM, SEPTEMBER 06, 2014

 Mike Westfall said...

> The only "call" the Bible talks about in this sense is a revelational and verbal call to prophetic ministry.

Oh, OK then. Not "called" to be a pastor. Actually, I'm called to be a prophet!

Thanks for clarifying that!

9:52 AM, OCTOBER 15, 2014



DJP said...

Exactly!

Wait, what?

12:12 PM, OCTOBER 15, 2014

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